

## Challenges and Strategies in the Translation of News Headlines: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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### Abstract

As the essence of news, headline is deemed as the summary of a news article, hence it should be highly refined and its importance is self-evident. Influenced by the differences between Chinese and Western culture, headline translation should not be taken as a mere conversion between different languages, instead, it is a way through which the two culture interact. Therefore, excellent translation of a headline may receive favorable response from general readership; it might even be more useful than the article itself. The purpose of this essay is to analyze the influence on headline incurred by cultural differences between China and the West before putting forward constructive translation strategies for news headlines, doing so allows us to discover the hidden message in a headline and build accurate and effective transcultural communication.

**Key words:** News Headline; Cross-culture; Translation

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As the essence of a piece of news, the headline is deemed as the summary of a news article, hence it should be highly refined. A headline is meant to catch a reader's attention at first sight, it conveys crucial message, summarizes the theme of the article and highlights its purpose. Sometimes, a witty headline will interest the readers and

receive favorable response from the public, it might enjoy more popularity than the article per se. However, cultural differences between China and the West have a certain influence on headline in terms of its translation. It is only by understanding the traits of headlining and differences between Chinese and Western culture and employing the right translation strategy can we make the headline better serve its purpose.

## 1. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND HEADLINE TRANSLATION

### 1.1 Language Background and Difference in Connotation

Even though headlining in both Chinese and English is instructed to be simple with a clear focus, we still need to consider the pragmatic and semantic differences developed over the long course of history in both languages when it comes to headlining. For instance, to convey the same meaning, more characters in English will be needed than in Chinese. Therefore, a headline written in Chinese generally contains more meaning than that of an English one with the same space, since the latter needs to reconstruct grammatical structure and reduce characters to either save space or produce the same effect. The literary and aesthetic gracefulness of the Chinese language can be felt by readers in translated headlines, e.g. Chinese headlines stress the importance of antithesis, therefore translators should be good at using literary quotations and idiomatic expressions.

(1) The war in Europe is ended surrender is unconditional V-E will be proclaimed today

欧战结束! 德国无条件投降! 今将宣布定为欧洲胜利日

Back translation: European war ended. Germany surrendered unconditionally. Today is proclaimed as the European Victory Day.

(2) Basketball: US crush China

男篮惨败美国主帅尤纳斯：王治郅还是没状态

Back translation: Men basketball disastrous defeated by U.S., commander in chief Jonas: Wang Zhizhi not in the right condition

(3) “Young Marshal” dies at 101

捉蒋传奇人物张学良先圣仙逝

Back translation: Legendary man Mr. Zhang Xueliang, who caught Chiang Kai-shek, passed way

(4) Murderers caught—thanks to a monkey

猴眼金睛凶犯现场

Back translation: Money’s blazing eyes spotted murderer present

The four examples above have highlighted the differences of the Chinese and English language in headlining: the first example shows that with the same amount of characters, the Chinese headline is relatively more expressive; the second example gives us a succinct and straightforward English headline, meanwhile the Chinese headline has reconstructed grammatical structure and used symbols like colon and comma in limited space in order to achieve communicating effect; the third and fourth examples have shown us the feature that literary gracefulness is required for Chinese headlines.

The cultural differences have created not just different linguistic convention for the Chinese and westerners, many differences are also present in the connotation of their languages. In other words, cultural and connotative meanings are manifested through various words and expressions. Generally speaking, while red is descriptive of happiness and auspiciousness in China and various festive items are adorned with the colour, white symbolises sadness. However, this principle does not apply in the west where red is deemed as a symbol of inauspiciousness, blood and violence, and white, purity and fineness. In China, dragons are taken as a sign of authority and power, but the same is a demonic incarnation in the west.

In the meantime, the surviving environment in China and the west have also created their cultural differences, which are then reflected in the choice of words. For instance, there are many idioms about fish in the English language, we use “drink like a fish” to describe someone who guzzles water. The word “swig” (*Pinyin: Niu Yin, meaning drink like a cow*) will be employed in the same context in China. Similarly, the English expression “spend money like water” will be the best to describe a spendthrift, but in Chinese it should be “wield away gold like dust” (*Pinyin: Hui Jin Ru Tu*). The differences here are pretty obvious.

## 1.2 Different Ways of Thinking

Bao Huinan once said that “thoughts and language are associated, they are interactive, differences in thoughts have resulted in the linguistic diversity between different languages” (Bao, 2001, p.25). There are many opinions

in the academia in terms of the different ways of thinking existing in the east and the west, the topic has been researched by many. Ji Xianlin mentioned in *Shenzhou Wenhua Xuji*: “The cultural systems in the east and the west share their similarities and differences, yet their interdependence stands out. Personally, to differentiate, the key lies in the ways of thinking: the east is prone to generalise, and the west, analyse.” (p.25) There are scholars who compare the different ways of thinking in the east and the west using ontology, they believe that easterners are primitive in that they emphasises overall harmony and stress oneness from greatness. Meanwhile, westerners are believed to be rational since they value analysis and stress individuality. Thus, easterners base their thinking in three perspectives while westerners often employ a focus in their way of thinking. Bao Huinan has, in a linguistic point of view, summarised the differences in thinking between Chinese and westerners in the three following aspects: First, there are differences between concrete thinking and abstract thinking. Influenced by their culture, Chinese people tend to think about things in a concrete way, whereas westerners, in a relatively abstract manner. For instance, adjectives or their noun forms are often used to describe people with the same characteristics, as “wisdom” is used to represent the wise and “folly”, fools. Secondly, there are differences between comprehensive thinking and analytical thinking. This points back to the differences in thinking Mr. Ji Xianlin mentioned in his book “the east is prone to generalise, and the west, analyse.” The so-called “generalise” is to look at the various parts of things together, emphasising the dialectical unity between different parts. “Analyse”, on the other hand, is the habit of breaking up a whole into smaller parts. For example, when reporting a hot social topic, Chinese headlines tend to summarise the event, as in “pay attention to the issues and difficulties of the people”, while English headlines tend to focus on a specific event: “Biden’s son headed to Iraq in 2008”. Both ways of thinking have their own advantages and disadvantages, as they are formed gradually with an origin in history. Thirdly, there are differences between subjective thinking and objective thinking. People from the east are subject-oriented, they take human beings as the center of observation, thinking and inquiry. On the other hand, people from the west are object-oriented, they take nature as the subject and focus on objective observation and research. More often than not, in English headlines, we may across headlines without a subject, i.e. “Food drops ‘great TV’ but almost useless”. However, in translating the headline into Chinese, it needs a specific subject and even an object, therefore the headline is rendered in Chinese as “Air-dropped foods is just a show-off, Arabians watch the sky and sigh” (Bao, 2001, p.25).

Additionally, people in the east are more into using euphemistic expressions while their counterparts are

taking a more direct and linear approach. The differences are manifested not just in headlines but everyday life.

### 1.3 Differences and Conversion in Historical Allusions

In the long course of historical development, historical allusions have become an integral part of a language, thus they cannot to be taken by their literal meaning. Therefore, while in reporting, editing and translating news, we need to improve its quality as a whole by considering the differences between Chinese historical allusions and the western ones through localization, thereby avoiding any misunderstanding due to cultural differences. Though there are a few historical allusions in Chinese that can be matched to the English ones since they share the same meaning and connotation (as in “burn one’s boats” to *Po Fu Chen Zhou* (break the caldrons and sink the boats), “strike while the iron is hot” to *Chen Re Da Tie*(strike while the iron is hot) and“百川归海而海不盈” (all rivers flow to the sea yet the sea is not full), yet most of them are just a partial match, a good example can be found in “walls have ears” and its partial match *Ge Qiang You Er* (ears are next to the walls). There are some other historical allusions that are metaphorically different in the Chinese language and English. For instance, “black horse”, a classic allusion in the west can be used to compare the Chinese proverb *Hai Qunzhi Ma* (a horse that harms the herd). Most allusions in English have come from the Bible, Greek and Roman mythology and Shakespeare’s plays, e.g. “A Pandora’s Box” refers to disaster. However, Chinese allusions and proverbs have developed over a long time and the source of origin is far wider than that of English. Therefore, the cultural differences reflected through these allusions will impact on the headline translation and should not be overlooked.

## 2. HEADLINES TRANSLATION STRATEGY

The semantic functions of a headline have indicated that its translation should stay as true to the original as possible while also keeping its conciseness and vividness, because only the most refined words from the source text will be presented to the target readers. Nevertheless, due to cultural differences, headlines translation is hardly ever the same in meaning and form as the original. In order to stay true to the original, translators will often employ different translation methods when confronting with such a situation.

### 2.1 Direct Translation

The advantage of direct translation is that it has retained the linguistic features, forms and meanings of the source text. Even though the culture in China may vary from that in the west, yet thoughts and feelings and mindset

are pretty much the same for all people. Therefore, direct translation is the often seen in headline translation as it is the most common strategy for all translators.

(1) Jordan, the superhero of the bulls

乔丹,公牛队的超级英雄

Back translation: Jordan, Bull team’s superhero

(2) South Africa to end Taiwan diplomatic ties

南非结束与台湾外交关系

Back translation: South Africa ends diplomatic ties with Taiwan

### 2.2 Free Translation

Free translation can be employed when direct translation of a headline fails to convey the accurate meaning of the source text, or when its readability fails to be accepted. Zhu Yige (2008, p.83) points out that, due to the limitations caused by cultural differences in the target text social background, translators may be forced to discard the literal meaning of the source text and employ free translation so that readers may understand the headline’s meaning.

(1) Bush makes the dictionary

“邪恶轴心”入选新版《牛津引语字典》

Back translation: Axis of evil chosen to be in the new edition of Oxford Quotation Dictionary

(2) My girls, my wife

有情人钟情眷属

Back translation: Those in love will end up being in love

(3) Go to bed married, wake up divorced

一觉婚变

Back translation: A sleep create marriage crisis

(4) Looking back to look ahead

回首往昔展望未来

Back translation: look back to the past and look into the future

The examples above have employed free translation to a certain extent, the last example used both direct translation and free translation to make it sound more natural and fluent, the outcome is ideal. The use of free translation is not only able to present the original meaning of a headline, but also reflect the richness and profoundness of the Chinese language. On the other hand, for some headlines, the use of direct translation will not only fail to convey the message, but the readability of the text will also be undermined. As indicated by the first example “Bush makes the dictionary”, a direct translation of such headline will make it sound absurd and misleading.

### 2.3 Amplification

If the readers of the target text lack of relevant background knowledge, it might be necessary for translators to amplify relevant information. English headlines are after succinctness and plainness while Chinese headlines require literary gracefulness to a

certain extent, the latter needs clear names for the people, regions and identities, yet the former tends to omit such details. Consequently, when translating headlines from English to Chinese, a translator may need to adopt amplification as a supplement to strengthen the understanding for readers.

(1) Quake death toll tops 5000

日本神户地区地震死亡人数已超过五千

Back translation: Japan Kobe Region Earthquake Death Toll Over 5000

(2) Conspiracy of silence

共同缄默, 禽兽医生逍遥法外数十年

Back translation: Mutual Silence, Beastly Doctor At Large for Decades

(3) Britannia rues the waves

不列颠悲悼海洋 (注: 该标题仿英海军军歌《不列颠统治海洋》)

Back translation: Britain Mourns the Ocean (this headline imitates the British Navy's song –Britannia Rules the Waves)

From the examples listed above we can see that a name has been added to the first example, a result is given to the second and third example respectively, and background information is introduced in the last example. These translated headlines have introduced the missing information in logical and semantical aspects to the readers, this improves the accuracy of such expression and closes the distance between the news event and the people reading it. Therefore, when translating a headline from English into Chinese, a translator may add supplementary information where necessary.

## 2.4 Omission

Omission, as its name suggests, is to cut down unnecessary words in a headline to avoid being lengthy and repetitive. The method is adopted when translating a headline from Chinese into English, since there are many modifiers in Chinese headlines, so the omission of unnecessary words in the process of translation is too meet the reading habits and preferences for most English readers.

(1) How globalization hurts the poor in Africa

全球化有损非洲穷人利益

Back translation: Globalization hurts African Poor People's Benefits

(2) 男篮惨败美国主帅尤纳斯: 王治郅还是没状态

Back Translation: Men basketball disastrous defeated by U.S., commander in chief Jonas: Wang Zhizhi not in the right condition

Basketball: US crush China

The purpose of omission is to simplify and refine the headline content, therefore when translating into English from Chinese we may omit adjectives and adverbs in the headline and use punctuation to convey meaning and save space.

## 2.5 Rhetorical Manifestation

Although news is required to be concise and accurate, distinctive headlines are often essential to attract readers. A good headline can brighten up a news story. Therefore, the use of various rhetorical devices and techniques is of great importance. If the headline contains some rhetorical devices, such as puns, metaphors, rhymes, etc., then the translation should also try to show the rhetorical features of the original text so as to achieve the same rhetorical features as the original.

(1) After the booms, everything is gloom

一别繁荣, 一片愁容

Back translation: Once parted with prosperity, what's left is a cloud of grief

(2) Older, wiser, calmer

人愈老, 智愈高, 心愈平

Back translation: The older people are, the wiser they become, and calmer their hearts are

The first example has demonstrated the rhyme in the original, while “boom” and “gloom” are the end rhyme, the Chinese translation has used homophones “荣” (rong) and “容” (rong) to achieved the same feature in addition to using “一” and “一” (yi) for alliteration. The translation has fully displayed the rhetorical effect and created a sense of unity. Similarly, the second example has used comparative feature in the original to achieve a send of rhythm, its translated version sounds catchy in that it has echoed with the original using three “愈” (yu).

## 3. CONCLUSION

Headlines written both in Chinese and English reflect their own linguistic and cultural features, thus the translated versions are not to be taken as a mere conversion between the two languages, but a kind of communication between different cultures. In the process of translation, translators might be influenced by the differences such as cultural background, thinking pattern, religious belief and historical allusions, all of which might have an influence on the outcome. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that a translator uses different translation strategies depending on the situation. The application of the right translation strategies will not only reproduce the news events, but also facilitate the communication between different cultures. Certainly, the principle of faithful translation should always be kept in mind along with the essential elements of news: accuracy and conciseness, followed by the reproduction of the style employed in the source language. It is only in this way can we discover the hidden cultural message in an original headline, thereby building accurate and effective transcultural communication.

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